



OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

February 10, 2004

Ms. Jennifer A. Soffer
General Counsel
Texas State Board of Medical Examiners
P.O. Box 2018
Austin, Texas 78768-2018

OR2004-0947

Dear Ms. Soffer:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 195873.

The Texas State Board of Medical Examiners (the "board") received a request for "any and all documents pertaining to the complaint" against a named physician. You state that you have released a copy of the "disciplinary information" and the "Public Physician Verification Report" to the requestor. You claim that the remaining requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

We first address the board's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code. Subsections 552.301(a) and (b) of the Act provide:

(a) A governmental body that receives a written request for information that it wishes to withhold from public disclosure and that it considers to be within one of the [Act's] exceptions . . . must ask for a decision from the attorney general about whether the information is within that exception if there has not been a previous determination about whether the information falls within one of the exceptions.

(b) The governmental body must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply within a reasonable time but not later than the 10th business day after the date of receiving the written request.

Further, section 552.301(e) provides that a governmental body is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open records request (1) general written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, (2) a copy of the written request for information, (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the date the governmental body received the written request, and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents.

You state that the board received the request for information on November 14, 2003. However, the information that you provided reflects that the request is dated October 28, 2003 and date stamped "Received" on November 3, 2003. Therefore, the board had until ten business days following its receipt of that request to request a decision from this office regarding the requested information, and until fifteen business days following its receipt of that request to submit the items of information required to be submitted to this office under section 552.301(e) of the Government Code. You failed to ask for a decision until December 2, 2003 as to whether the information at issue is excepted from disclosure. Thus, you failed to request a decision from this office in accordance with section 552.301.

Pursuant to section 552.302, a governmental body's failure to comply with section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.--Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Normally, a compelling reason for non-disclosure exists where some other source of law makes the information confidential or where third party interests are at stake. Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977). The application of section 552.101 of the Government Code can provide a compelling reason for overcoming the presumption of openness. *See* Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977). Thus, we address your arguments under this exception.

You claim that the submitted investigative records are excepted under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 164.007(c) of the Occupations Code. Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This exception encompasses information that another statute makes confidential. Section 164.007(c) provides the following:

(c) Each complaint, adverse report, investigation file, other investigation report, and other investigative information in the possession of or received or

gathered by the board or its employees or agents relating to a license holder, an application for license, or a criminal investigation or proceeding is privileged and confidential and is not subject to discovery, subpoena, or other means of legal compulsion for release to anyone other than the board or its employees or agents involved in discipline of a license holder. For purposes of this subsection, investigative information includes information relating to the identity of, and a report made by, a physician performing or supervising compliance monitoring for the board.

Occ. Code § 164.007(c). Section 164.007(c) applies to investigatory records gathered by the board during an investigation of a license holder. Based upon our review of your arguments and the submitted information, we find that the submitted records constitute investigative information possessed by the board relating to a license holder. Accordingly, you must withhold this information under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 164.007(c) of the Occupations Code.¹

You request that this office issue a previous determination to categorically encompass the types of investigative records that were requested. You also request that the board be allowed to apply such previous determination retroactively. We decline to issue such a determination at this time. Accordingly, this letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records

¹As our ruling is dispositive, we do not reach your argument under section 160.006 of the Occupations Code.

will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877)673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512)475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/jh

Ref: ID# 195547
Enc. Submitted documents

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